



1771-1840

## JOSEPH SMITH, SR., FAMILY REUNION

September 18, 1973

President Harold B. Lee  
47 East South Temple  
Salt Lake City, Utah 84111

Dear President Lee:

As per your request in your office Tuesday, August 21, 1973, I am sending you the following synopsis of the second Joseph Smith, Sr., Family Reunion held August 16, 17, and 18, 1973, in Independence, Missouri.

Just before the reunion I drove to Ronan, Montana, to pick up Gracia Denning, her daughter Laurie, her mother, Lorena Normandeau, and her mother's sister, Elizabeth Hahn. Gracia and I had been working to get her mother and aunt to the reunion for the past year. We felt that her family and mine should all go to Independence on the charter bus from Salt Lake City and that probably the only sure way to get her mother and aunt to the reunion was to pick them up and deliver them.

I met Gracia and her family at her mother's home in Ronan, Montana, on Sunday evening, August 12. The next morning, shortly before our party started out for Utah, Gracia's mother, Lorena, fell down the stairs in her home. In spite of her obvious pain and discomfort, she got into my car twenty minutes later, and we were all off to the reunion.

As we drove to my home in Provo, Gracia and I discussed many things including the nature of the unseen forces which seemed combined to thwart our efforts to take her mother and aunt (two great-granddaughters of the Prophet Joseph Smith) to their family reunion in Missouri.

I felt particularly good that Gracia's mother and aunt would be numbered with the faithful Latter-Day Saints, who had chartered a bus to go to the Smith Reunion in Missouri--among whom were J. Winter Smith in his ninety-third year (a grandson of Samuel Harrison Smith), and Edith Smith Patrick (a granddaughter of Hyrum Smith and sister of our late President, Joseph Fielding Smith). I reasoned that if "the appearance of evil" is something to be avoided (as it can lead to evil) then "the appearance of goodness" should be pursued (for it can lead to goodness). In other words, Gracia's mother and aunt, though not members of our Church, would appear to be sympathetic to our cause. This "appearance" could prove beneficial and lead to "goodness" knows what!

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After a night's rest in Provo, Gracia, her mother and aunt, together with myself, my wife Toni, and our five-month old son Jared Joseph, boarded the reunion charter bus at 6:30 a.m., Wednesday, August 15, at the Greyhound Bus Terminal in Salt Lake City. Just before our departure, Patriarch Eldred G. Smith came on our bus to see us off. He offered a beautiful prayer in our behalf for a safe and successful trip. Eldred told us he would see us in Independence when we got there as he would be flying out later on a commercial airline.

The next day, after a stopover in Denver, as our bus rolled east over the plains of Kansas, Gracia and I talked about our feelings concerning the reunion. Gracia echoed one of my feelings when she said, "I know it's wrong to ask God for a favorable sign concerning this reunion, but I would still feel better if I had one." A little while later people on the bus began singing hymns and gospel songs. Our Negro bus driver, Cornelius Holmes, joined us in song. He even sang a few gospel solos over the bus PA system. At the close of his singing, Cornelius, still holding the hand mike to his mouth, addressed us all. He said he was pleased to share in the beautiful spirit present on the bus. He said there was something very special about the members of the family he was taking to the reunion in Missouri, and there were tears in his eyes when he asked that the Lord might continue to bless us all.

Immediately I recalled the desire Gracia and I had both expressed to ask God that we might have a "sign" pertaining to the reunion. I had no doubt that we were experiencing one, unexpected as it was, flowing from the lips of a Negro bus driver somewhere in an obscure portion of western Kansas. Our bus driver paid a final tribute to us in closing by saying he almost wished that we would adopt him and take him with us as a long lost Smith to the family reunion. I couldn't help but think, smiling to myself, how this would surprise the Independence Smiths.

If either Gracia or I needed more signs, we were to have them within the hour it took to arrive at the Stone Church in Independence, where the reunion reception was in progress. Our bus pulled into the Independence city limits as a spectacular ruby-red sun, behind multi-colored pink and purple clouds, was setting. As we disembarked from our bus to register at the reunion a young girl, Donna Smith, was excitedly greeting us. She explained quickly that she was a granddaughter of the late RLDS president, Israel Smith, and that she would shortly be joining our Church. She has since been baptized. If either of us had any doubts acknowledging the hand of God in this reunion, they were forgotten now.

Following our brief appearance at the reception at the RLDS Stone Church, we went to the Independence Ramada Inn where most of the bus travelers stayed during the reunion. Gracia's mother, Lorena, and her Aunt Elizabeth

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stayed with their cousin, Josephine Ebbeling. Gracia, Toni, Jared, and I stayed with Lynn E. Smith and his wife at their home in Independence. Lynn Smith is an RLDS patriarch and a grandson of David Hyrum Smith, the Prophet Joseph's last born son.

That evening, very late, I walked from Lynn's home to the temple lot some four or five blocks away. Near the Church of Christ building, which stands on the piece of ground Joseph the Prophet dedicated for the building of the temple, I knelt and prayed that the desires of the Lord might be accomplished at the reunion. While I prayed, I felt an evil presence pressing in around the area where I was. I felt safe enough, as if I were in a bubble of divine protection, but nevertheless I was aware of the dark pressure pushing in from outside.

I am enclosing programs from the reunion proceedings and the Friday night banquet. The regular reunion sessions were held in the RLDS Ridgewood-Pleasant Heights Church. The banquet was held in the basement of the RLDS Auditorium. The theme for the banquet was selected by Lynn Smith and was of special interest to the LDS Smiths: "The hearts of the children shall be turned to the fathers."

After the banquet Gracia told me of meeting her cousin, Kim Dilley (a descendant of the Prophet Joseph through Alexander Hale Smith), who had joined the Church two months ago. Kim is planning on being sealed to her husband in the temple soon. Gracia reported that Kim's sister, Kathy, and her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Harold McCullough, are currently investigating the Church.

Saturday, August 18, there were planned responses to the talks given on Friday ("Joseph F. Smith" by Leonard Arrington, our Church Historian, and "Joseph Smith, III" by Alma Blair, a professor at Graceland College). RLDS President W. Wallace Smith responded as a son of Joseph, III, and Edith Smith Patrick responded as a daughter of Joseph F. Smith. "Aunt" Edith prefaced her recollections of her father with a few remarks on "polygamy." Alma Blair had mentioned polygamy frequently in somewhat negative contexts during his presentation on Joseph, III the day before, and Aunt Edith felt it was necessary to define exactly what Mormon plural marriage consisted of and how and why it was practiced. (Aunt Edith explained that "polygamy" was the practice of one man having many wives and one wife having many husbands at the same time in society and that patriarchal marriage was revealed by the Prophet Joseph Smith as early as 1842 and that only worthy men called by the president of the church could enter into this "new and everlasting covenant.") These few minutes comprised the most tense period of the reunion. President W. Wallace Smith, who was sitting next to me on the stand, squirmed constantly and finally turned to me and said in a voice only audible to me, "I think this is in very bad taste!" I made a brief apology to President Smith on the basis that no one screened anyone else's talks. He settled down somewhat by the end of her talk, but he was visibly upset.

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By the time Aunt Edith finished her response talk, I believe I found the right words to summarize: I told the assembly that I had seen a letter in the possession of J. Winter Smith at his home in San Jose, California, some years ago. This letter was from Joseph Smith, III to "Uncle" J's father, Samuel H. B. Smith, dated May, 1914. In this letter, Joseph III stated that he felt both he and Samuel's "time" had come and that Samuel would precede him in death. This statement proved prophetic as Samuel H. B. Smith died in June of 1914 and Joseph III died the following December. Further, Joseph III wrote, ". . . not withstanding the religious differences we have had, I have always loved you as a member of my father's family." I suggested to the assembly that we follow the same procedure. My suggestion was well received.

At the close of the last official meeting of the 1973 reunion, I told the family that the next Joseph Smith, Sr., Family Reunion would be held in Salt Lake City, Utah, during August of 1975. I explained that plans were being made so that the family could attend either a rehearsal of performance of the Tabernacle Choir. This announcement was received with enthusiasm. I then asked for a show of hands from the floor as to how many of the family were planning to attend. Everyone raised their hands!

Saturday evening, August 18, about 6:30 p.m., Ellis Craig (my good friend from southern California and a grandson of Lot Smith), Ralph G. Smith (our Patriarch's uncle), and I called upon Reginald A. Smith in his room at the RLDS sanitarium and hospital. Reginald was recovering from an operation. His wife, Alegra, was also present and we had a very pleasant visit with them both. (Reginald Smith is the brother of President W. Wallace Smith. These two men are the last surviving grandchildren of the Prophet Joseph Smith.) Alegra walked us down to the hospital lobby where my wife and baby were waiting for us. She asked about the other members of the "Utah" branch of the family. I told her that most of them were staying at the Independence Ramada Inn. After we departed, Alegra drove to the Ramada Inn to visit her kinsmen. She took them the best wishes of her husband who was unable to accompany her. Reginald and Alegra Smith are perhaps the warmest of the "Missouri" branch of the family. (A double relationship exists between Reginald A. Smith and Edith Smith Patrick. Their great grandfather on the Smith side was Joseph Smith, Sr. Reginald's wife, Alegra, was a Patrick and Edith Smith Patrick's deceased husband, William T., was a cousin of Alegra. Their grandmothers were sisters.)

Following our visit at the hospital and a visit to the Liberty Jail in nearby Liberty, Missouri (where we had arranged to meet Gracia Denning, her mother, her aunt, and cousin, Josephine Ebling, and Ralph G. Smith's wife, Geneva) we picked up Lynn Smith and his wife, Lorene, and went out to dinner at Stephenson's in south Independence. While at dinner we discussed several things. We took action on one item by organizing ourselves into a committee and resolving to recommend to all parties concerned that a Smith Family Library be organized. This library would exist in two locations: one at the

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Brigham Young University library and the other at the Graceland College library. It was suggested that all diaries, journals, papers, etc., pertaining to the "family" which might be in the possession of family members, be microfilmed and copies put in each branch of the proposed Smith Library. We recommended further that the patriarchs, Eldred G. Smith of our church and Lynn E. Smith of the RLDS church, chairmen this activity with perhaps Truman G. Madsen of our church and F. Mark McKiernan of the RLDS church acting as the respective college campus liaisons with the Smith Family Library.

After dinner, Gracia, her Aunt Elizabeth, Ellis Craig, and myself paid a call on Kenneth Julian Smith, a great grandson of the Prophet Joseph who resides in Independence. Gracia's grandmother and Kenneth's father were sister and brother. Kenneth is severely crippled with polio but still manages to be a very active member of the Church of Christ: known as the Hedrickites. Edna, Kenneth's wife, works to support the family; her invalid mother stays with them. Kenneth has the Bible that belonged to Emma Smith, complete with valuable genealogical information inscribed therein which is reported by Kenneth to be in Emma's own handwriting. We called on Kenneth for the purpose of examining it closely. (I made a handwritten copy of this information.) During the course of our visit Kenneth took a terrible fall which caused him a great deal of pain. All of our hearts went out to this dear man. Later I learned he fractured his leg in two places. As we helped him into his wheelchair I asked him if he fell often. He replied, "No more than I have to." The memory of Kenneth and this visit to his home will linger with me always. As we drove away I felt that this man's joy at having a whole body in the resurrection would be a greater joy than any of us, who have not been likewise afflicted, could ever know.

Our bus left early Sunday morning, August 19th, for Salt Lake City. During our journey across Kansas we had a testimony meeting which greatly edified us all and during which time Gracia's mother, Lorena, shared an entry that she had freshly written into her journal of the trip: "I know that I shall join the Church." A simple statement, but so thrilling to read.

We stayed overnight in Denver in a motel where Gracia's Aunt Elizabeth and her mother, Lorena, desired a blessing from Patriarch J. Winter Smith. He complied and we, the other passengers on the bus, witnessed his prayers for blessings in their behalf and prayed with them for the fulfillment of those blessings.

The bus arrived in Salt Lake City on Monday evening, August 20. The next day I brought Gracia, her mother, and her aunt to meet you. What a great joy that was for all of us to visit with you, President Romney, Brother Haycock, Elders Hunter, Ashton, and others. I particularly recall with a fond memory Gracia's Aunt Elizabeth Hahn telling you, "This is the best time I have ever had in my whole life." I also remember the gentle spirit that was present when you took her hand and looked into her eyes and said, "In other words as Agrippa said to Paul, 'Almost persuadest thou me?'"

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Following our visit with you I drove Gracia's Aunt Elizabeth to the airport for her return trip home. She manifested a strong desire, while our experience of visiting you and the other leaders of our Church was still fresh in our minds, to be "numbered" with us.

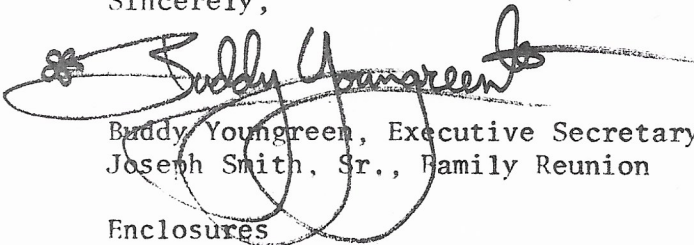
Thank you, President Lee, for your time, interest, and prayers in behalf of our attempts to unify this great family. I will look forward to conferring further with you regarding any questions you may have pertaining to this past significant reunion.

I am also sure that you would enjoy viewing the film I prepared for this year's reunion entitled "Joseph and Emma." Perhaps we can get together soon to view it and confer.

I remain grateful for membership in the Lord's Church and for being an instrument in His hands to help accomplish His purposes. Not only do I acknowledge the hand of God in this activity, but I marvel at the power and the spirit which accompanies the many aspects of this project.

God bless you, President Lee, in your calling and responsibilities.

Sincerely,



Buddy Younggreen, Executive Secretary  
Joseph Smith, Sr., Family Reunion

Enclosures

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